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PARIS AND LONDON FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2007
TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PREL CD
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT DEBY'S ELECTION: NOW WHAT?

Classified By: Ambassador Marc Wall for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Few bothered to vote, no opposition leader of any stature was a candidate, and the voter registration lists were virtually useless, but never mind. Now that these peaceful, but flawed elections held on May 3 are behind him, President Deby will claim a popular mandate for holding on to power for at least another five years. Most Chadians will reluctantly acquiesce, but few believe they had a chance to vote in a credible or meaningful election. All here will be listening closely to what we say.

We should be honest about our concerns, but also alert to how our words can encourage democratic reform. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) President Idriss Deby Itno's two year campaign to extend his mandate in power for a third term completed its final stage with the holding of presidential elections May 3.

Like the vote in the National Assembly in May 2004 to authorize a referendum on revising the constitution to permit him to stay on in office indefinitely and the referendum itself in June 2005, the election on May 3 provoked a storm of controversy and galvanized his enemies against him. But the outcome will no doubt be deemed to be the one he wanted. The announcement of the results, their certification by the Constitutional Council, and the possible (though unlikely) need to hold a run-off election are still to come. Still, barring more armed insurrections or a palace coup, Deby can look forward to his inauguration ceremonies on August 8 blessing his mandate for another five years in power.

It Looked Good, But Was It?

¶3. (U) The voting on May 3 in the capital city unfolded without incident (septel). The streets were uncustomarily empty for much of the day, but people who chose to vote were able to do so at one of the 400 polling stations set up throughout town. Most were simple stands of tables and chairs set under shade trees along dusty neighborhood

streets. Knowledgeable attendants dutifully checked names off the computer lists of registered voters. Police were present at each site, but not overbearingly so. With few exceptions, brightly colored ballots for Deby and the other candidates were plentiful through the day. Upon arrival, voters would present their voter registration cards, receive one copy of each ballot, then proceed to a corner of the site where they would stand behind a white sheet and place the ballot of their choice in an envelop. They would then slip the envelop into a clear plastic box and have their voting card stamped and one of their finger tips daubed with indelible ink.

¶4. (SBU) Despite a level of organization rarely seen in N'Djamena, the Embassy teams visiting the polling stations throughout the day did notice various irregularities -- underage voters, cases of double voting (or more), a large number of unregistered voters signing in as "nomads," sometimes far exceeding the number of registered voters appearing to cast their ballots. We were not able to ascertain any cases of people being paid to vote, but at least one voter told us of concerns by workers about being harassed by employers if they were not able to show their registration card with a stamp showing they had voted. More fundamental problems were evident as well. Voter turnout was light, perhaps, in our unscientific estimate, 20 percent at best. No major opposition leader offered himself as a candidate. With 5.6 million voters registered in a country with over half of its population of perhaps nine million under 18 years of age, the voter rolls were egregiously bloated. That anomaly may not have mattered anyway, with so many easily manipulated votes coming in from unregistered "nomads."

The Caravan Passes

¶5. (SBU) The surface show of a normal election thus masks the reality of an exercise few regard here as credible or meaningful. Deby and his supporters will no doubt trumpet the results as popular endorsement of his ambitions to stay in power for another term. They will brush aside charges that most Chadians and opposition leaders stayed away from the election because they were convinced that their involvement would make no difference in the outcome. The opposition had a chance to participate in the elections, but chose not to, they will argue. In response to criticisms of irregularities, they will answer: how do you know? In a sense, they will be right. With the exception of the Embassy teams, a few international journalists, and some local NGO's, no authoritative international teams of observers were present, either the day of the vote, or in the preparations leading up to it and the tabulation and certification now underway.

What Should We Say?

¶6. (C) Chadians are eagerly awaiting what we say about this election. For Deby, our positive assessment would represent the most important endorsement he could receive. On the other hand, our criticisms would sting. Although he could easily blow them off, he would have a hard time getting over the blow to his ego when what he most wants from the international community is "respect." For the opposition and the Chadian people, our words will resonate more loudly than any others. Expecting little from the European Union or African Union and fearing a whitewash from the French, they look to us as their last hope for speaking candidly about a political process they have written off long ago.

¶7. (C) In crafting a statement, we should be forthright in our assessment of the outcome and our affirmation of our principles, but also alert to how our words can help advance democratic reform. That will not be easy. Now that Deby can claim victory, he will likely be ready to give lipservice to

any roadmap we might suggest, but his past record does not suggest that he will be any more serious about implementing real reform. He is hardly the sort of leader inclined to share power with his opponents, at least not in any way that counts. His opponents know this. Short of Deby's commitment to a timeframe for leaving office or holding real elections, they will fiercely resist any plan that gives him cover for business-as-usual.

Action Request

¶8. (SBU) We urge Washington to consider issuing a statement that makes the following points:

-- We are pleased the May 3 election was conducted peacefully.

-- The low turnout, boycott by opposition parties, and flawed voter lists raise questions about the process.

-- We are disappointed that many Chadians did not believe that they would be able to vote in a credible election.

-- We urge Chadians to engage in a dialogue on opening the political process, sharing power in a new government, improving the electoral process, and reaching consensus on the regular hand over of presidential power.

-- We are ready to work with the Chadian government and people in their efforts to strengthen the democratic process in their country.

WALL